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The Undefined Middle: Exploring the Role of the Union Representative in the Modern Teachers Union Structure

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**The Undefined Middle:
Exploring the Role of the Union Representative in the Modern Teachers Union
Structure**

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Amanda Erin Lee

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Introduction

As an integral part of the teachers union, the union representative works to serve the needs of the union on a local level while also maintaining employment as a teacher within the school system. The continuously evolving political climate that surrounds this organization including shifting educational laws and leadership on the federal and state levels, has left the role of the union representative largely undefined in the current teachers union structure. As a necessary aspect of both the school and the union, the union representative must fulfill role requirements in two structures that are frequently at odds with each other, making it important to assess how the representative functions in these roles and manages the potential conflicts between actors in the structure.

While much research has been done regarding teachers unions in general, the body of literature has left this middle union position largely undefined. There is very little research that directly addresses the position of local union leaders and representatives in the modern political context. Even more to the point, there is almost no prior research that seeks to explain how the representative meets the possibly divergent goals that are innately bound to his or her station. This study looks to do exactly that, exploring the perspective of the union representative as it views interactions with school district officials, other union members, and the legalities prescribed by governmental mandate. Utilizing in-depth interviews to access the subjective view of the representative and observing the daily professional duties of the participant, this study provides a broader context and understanding of the situation at hand. The actors who are directly observed and interviewed, however, are only a part of what factors into the role of the representative and the resulting perspective attached to the position. The

structure and goals of the union beyond the local level (i.e. state and national level) as well as the understood meaning of union membership all indirectly contribute to the observations made in the present research. It was therefore imperative that a greater context for the union be explored as well.

Due to the politics surrounding the representative's position, the greater political context of union action needs to be examined. The interviewees and those involved in the observed interactions are public high school teachers and officials who are subject to the legal and policy decisions made by the state governor, the state superintendent for schools, the state Department of Education, the national Department of Education, and national legislators. It is relevant to this research to mention that the study was conducted during one of the most tumultuous political times for unions in recent history. On a local level, as will be discussed more thoroughly in later sections, the tumult manifests in aspects of the conflicts between the teachers union and the public school administration. The study requires exploration into the policy issues that assist in defining the observed interactions and the correlating positions taken by the frequently opposing sides.

What would generally be a strict study of conduct in a professional structure has an inescapably political basis founded in several specific policy matters. This study is then a snapshot in time of union representatives taken during a period of political upheaval in unique and new state policies. By nature the present research is an exploratory study as it uses a small sample of union representatives to gather a substantial amount of data on a unique and situational perspective but the results of this study should be understood as part of a much larger whole. This research seeks to accurately represent the role of the union representative while recognizing that the role in question needs to

change and adapt to a new negotiating structure. The nature of upcoming union politics including current issues such as merit pay and “Right-to-Work” legislation, whether on the local, state, or national level, could go quite a distance in determining the characteristics of a union representative in a future climate. As it stands, the union representatives as they communicated their understandings and views of direct interactions with other union members and the school administration attribute the quality and nature of their work to the conflict that arises. Union representatives suffer the most role conflict when the expectations of the union membership do not align with the goals of the parent union. The role conflict seems to wane, however, when politics threaten the union structure, increasing membership collectivity. Therefore, the manner in which that conflict is addressed on the interpersonal and group levels depends upon the potential political impact of the union issue at hand.

Literature Review

Much of the existing research on unions was conducted during the 1970s and 1980s when society saw collective bargaining as a social movement and every union member was kept at the same level of power to maintain common understanding between members. (Fendrich 1977) This broad assessment held true for teachers unions but the research during this time period sought to explain the function of labor unions in general, limiting its applicability for teachers unions. Fiorito and Greer (1982) summarize the nature and quality of union research during this time, as well as its inherent gaps. By identifying patterns in these foundational studies using a time-series analysis, Fiorito and Greer (1982) uncovered the common characteristics of unions (including teachers unions), revealing that a positive political climate, higher prices, growing wages, and

increased employment stimulate union expansion while unemployment, underemployment, and “right-to-work” legislation stifle union growth. (1982)

All of these tendencies, as seen throughout the rest of the body of literature and the present research, remain relevant to teachers unions over time and circumstance. However, the existing research fails to account for the factors that separate teachers unions from their strictly labor counterparts. The level of education required to be a teacher, the teachers unions’ emphasis on professionalization (not just collective bargaining), and a working environment that requires different demands made by the union during working conditions negotiations, all make teachers and their union interests unique from those collectively negotiated by other labor unions. While there is some natural and ongoing overlap, teachers unions must be represented differently in union research. Fiorito and Greer (1982) call for an analysis of union growth that more accurately assesses the relative impact of individual factors such as the gender and racial demographics of certain local labor union branches, the historical politics of geographic areas, and inflation in the national economy. Most significant to this study is their criticism of union research that fails to properly weigh the importance of the employment environment and the difference between white collar and blue collar environments on union support and expansion. (1982: 18) Further specialization in research is needed as the white collar work environment to which members of teachers unions are exposed is more likely to influence “decision making, compensation, and supervision” (1982) processes of the union function than the blue collar environment.

While aspects of the early literature on unions do not include the characteristics needed for inclusive research, early research made important statements on the ideology

of early unions that still manifest in the modern teachers union structure. Largely driven by communal goals and educator advocacy, early teachers unions and the resulting literature concentrated on the revolutionary nature of the process. The structure itself denied any imposition of union ranks and defined leadership positions in order to maintain a truly collective voice during the negotiation processes, keeping the interests of union members from fragmenting. Areas of this initial union foundation are still ideologically preserved but the bulk of the research performed during this time concentrates too much on this formation of collective goals and equal power distributions to uphold its relevancy during ongoing structural change of the teachers union. However, the protection of the original union conceptualization in the evolving union structure could prove to be a constant source of conflict in members' expectations of the teachers union function.

While the union representative eventually entered the union structure and academic studies as a result, this newer research reveals a trend that makes the present research necessary: the division of power and interests in the union system over time has undermined the collectivity of the past. (Eberts 2007) New roles and rankings have been established within a given union district and even within a given public school. A common structural model for teachers unions includes differentiation between the teachers who are rank-and-file union members and the union leaders who might or might not be teaching or even working in a standard school setting. On the local level, this distribution of power leads to a division of goals and interests among the different echelons of union participation. The impact of disintegrating collective bargaining manifests through new power dynamics between the individual union members and local

union representatives as well as the local union officials. (Eberts 2007) Due to the political shifts that alter the goals of the school system (such as increased emphasis on standardized testing) and by default cause changes in the function of the teachers union, the role of the union representative is becoming increasingly vague and demanding. These structural and political alterations have made the union representative more vulnerable to role conflict.

The role of the union representative needs some clarification as there have been multiple factors that obfuscate the nature of the position, but this study is certainly not the first to specialize on the function of the modern teachers union representative. Later studies conclude that the creation of a hierarchical power structure in the teachers union over time has created innately diverging goals between the separate levels of power. Poole (2009) identifies the middle positions of a teachers union structure (centering on the union representative) as paradoxical, resulting from the union's standard activist goals conflicting with the teachers' more concrete interests in school negotiations, but she does not investigate how these middle positions manage this conflict. This is elucidated to a limited extent in Stevenson's (2005) work because he defines the work of the representative as negotiating and liaising and classifies the types of negotiations that force the representative into a conflicted role position. Including discussion of the nature of both formal and informal negotiations, Stevenson's work is a significant addition to the literature on this issue but he does not examine the tools used by the representative to cope with this conflict in either case. Understanding this central position can lead to insight into the relationship between the school system and the union structure as a whole as this association can dictate teacher satisfaction, educational methods, and the power of

the school system. The role of the union representative thereby has the ability to define aspects of public education during his or her professional interactions.

As local union representatives and officials work more independently in their roles from the body of union members, loyalty to the union becomes more of a function of the position held in the union, further differentiating union representatives and officials from the standard union membership. According to Bayazit and Hammer (2004), there is a statistical difference between local union leaders and rank-and-file union members in terms of levels of commitment to the teachers union and perceptions of union interests. Because Bayazit and Hammer's study does not analyze this trend, the difference could signify an innate dissimilarity between the relative positions of power in the union structure or it may indicate a difference between the individuals who are standard union members and those who reach some level of union leadership. Investigation into the role of the union representative as it relates to that of the union member is required in order to understand the contrast between union positions and the disconnection between the interests of the teachers and the interests of the teachers union as an organization.

Background

The Union-Goals of the National Structure

While the essence of this research is the management of role conflict by the union representative, the potential structural sources of that conflict should be elucidated as well. The management style and goals of the national teachers union as they filter through the state branch and into the local branches help determine the expectations attached to the position of representative. The national union, in this case, is very open

about its mission across all sectors of education but especially in the area of collective bargaining. A structure of local unions mandated at the national level has been long established (although it should be noted that national union policy is discussed and frequently created at biennial convention where union leaders from local branches all over the country are invited to take part in a largely democratic process) and the position of the union representative is well-defined within the system. Based on their personal testimonies, two official definitions from the national organization can be applied to the participants in this study, that of a “union representative” and that of a “steward”.

“Union representative—A representative of the union who may or may not be an organizer. The union rep provides technical assistance and guidance during organizing and negotiations. Often the union rep has the responsibility to ensure that the efforts of the union local are compatible with the goals and expectations of the parent union. The union rep usually plays a major role in identifying and securing the financial resources necessary to support the local.” (AFT)

“Steward—A union member, usually elected by the members of a particular workplace, who represents the members in dealing with management. The union often negotiates paid time for the steward to attend to union business on behalf of the members at a given work site. The steward often helps members handle grievances or understand the provisions of the contract. The steward is also the main conduit of information between the union and the members.” (AFT)

While the needs of every local union branch will vary depending on the characteristics of the school system and the needs of the union members, the national union must maintain these standards as an issue of both organizational solidarity and branding. As a whole, membership in the national union must convey a certain ideological and political (although not necessarily political party) affiliation, with all of the same resources and practices available to local union members. Union representatives, as they take on their stated duties as well as those of the steward, have a responsibility to collective bargaining as it is viewed by the union. Their function is to

act in the interests of the holistic group of members, “represent[ing] the members in dealing with management” and to make sure that the measures taken by the local branch during such negotiations “are compatible with the goals and expectations of the parent union”. The mission that umbrellas the efforts made by individual local branches is that includes:

“improv[ing] the lives of ... members and their families; to give voice to their legitimate professional, economic and social aspirations; to strengthen the institutions in which we work; to improve the quality of the services we provide; to bring together all members to assist and support one another; and to promote democracy, human rights and freedom in [the] union, in our nation and throughout the world.” (AFT)

The union representative is an essential mechanism in realizing any part of this idealistic set of goals and fulfilling the duties of the position is chief in the entire union structure. Existing entirely on the concept of solidarity between educators, the union makes demands on the representative without necessarily accounting for the trouble that arises when the members themselves do not agree on an issue or course of action since it is the representative who is expected to convey information to members, negotiate on their behalf, and make sure the actions taken by the members align with the national union agenda. The responsibilities placed on union representatives by the union put them in a unique position as the individuals who have to contend with the daily realities of the public school environment while still speaking for the union. When the assumed consensus among union members (and the representative’s fellow coworkers) does not exist, the potential for conflict for the representative arises. This research explores whether or not such role conflict exists for the representatives, the extent to which it exists, and the mechanisms used to manage it.

Method

Participants

The participants themselves can be generally divided into two categories: primary participants who work within the union structure as representatives, interact with rank-and-file union members, and report to the union officials at the state or national level and secondary participants who are the rank-and-file union members, work alongside the union representative as well as the school administration, and are pertinent to the union representatives' fulfillment of duties. There are seven primary participants who, as union representatives, were both interviewed and observed at length in a process that will be described further into this study. Approximately twelve secondary participants were involved in the observations made of the primary participants, framing the quality and nature of the interaction observed.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, allowing gradual access to a relatively guarded population. To facilitate contact and trust with the relevant individuals, I initially contacted a single union representative teaching at a small urban high school who is also president of the district's small teachers union branch. (It should be noted that the president of a local union branch and the branch's building representatives hold technically different positions. However, the president is a former building representative and holds all of the duties of a building representative, especially when the branch is on the smaller end of the spectrum, but is also the vocal authority during the negotiation process. In this case, the president's job title does not negate the relevance of his perspective.) He was chosen and contacted purposively because he

works as a union representative in an active local branch of a national teachers union but also because he was in a position to put me in contact with other union representatives in the same local branch, adding substance and continuity to the research.

He volunteered to be a primary participant in this study, on the condition that it be approved by all required authorities and that he be made aware of any potential risks before the research commenced. Because it was necessary that aspects of this study will have to take place in the public school setting, most notably the observations of the representative's professional setting, I received written permission from the institution's principal to conduct my research on the school's premises and I made his support clear as new participants were recruited. The president of the local union branch not only volunteered to take part in the study but also gave written and oral permission for other union representatives to take part. Having been present for him giving permission, it is important to mention that he promoted the study without pressuring union representatives to take part or offering incentives for their participation.

Five of the seven primary participants came from the same local teachers union district as the first participant but in the interest of expanding the study's perspective, the initial primary participant built the sample by contacting the president of a neighboring local union branch. The president and an active building representative of this much larger branch volunteered to participate, allowing for a broader understanding of how teachers union representatives manage their duties and areas of potential conflict. The representatives from both local branches have to contend with the same state educational policy issues that arise but their behaviors allow for a cross-district comparison, adding a greater level of external validity to this in-depth exploratory study.

Procedure

In order to explore the manner in which union representatives manage their multitude of duties and the potential role conflict attached to the multifaceted position, this study utilized a two pronged approach. Consisting of both in-depth interviews of union representatives from two local teachers union districts and a series of observations of the representatives' work environment, this research sought to find the personal perspective of the position and a broader context for the position itself. The observations of primary and secondary participants were lengthy and conducted in a variety of places over time, focusing on the school environment to examine the interactions between the representative and the members as well as between the representative and the school administration. I spent one to two hours during three different visits, in the hallway, teachers lounge, main office, etc. to make these direct observations. I also attended and observed the executive board meetings that consist of local union representatives and officials to assess the methods they use to handle teachers union issues when they are outside of the context, influence, and interests of members and the union organization. Because I was not actively participating, I took informal notes during my observations and then expanded upon them immediately after the observation into more thorough field notes.

The in-depth interviews with union representatives, or primary participants, included prompts and probing ideas, which were shaped by myself with assistance from a sociologist. Each interview began with the same initial list of general questions that were unstructured enough to be open to any thoughts, explanations, concerns, etc. that the participants wanted to discuss but structured enough to add some guidance to the

interview in case they strayed too far from the subject matter at hand. Approximately twenty questions were asked of each participant over the course of the interviews, with roughly four of those questions addressing the issue of conflict with union members directly. Five of the questions asked were regarding the nature of the interactions that take place between union representatives and union members, three concerned the daily work of a union representative in a public school facility, five more went towards illuminating the quality of the interactions that take place between union representative and school administrators, and the rest generally varied depending on the participant's responses. (The essence of these interviews as semi-structured makes these numbers only averages of the actual number of questions asked of each participant.) It should be noted that as participants mentioned certain union issues in their interviews and during observations, I did independent background research to better understand how those issues impacted the representatives' perspective and interactions. Discussion of these matters is included in the "Results" section of this research.

The interviews lasted roughly one to two hours at a time, with one to two interviews (depending on participant availability, willingness to participate, and the depth of their experiences) given to each primary participant over time. Every interview was audio taped, allowing for direct interview transcription and further analysis after the research had taken place. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, coded pseudonyms were used in the recordings and written notes of the interviews and the observations. All primary participants signed an informed consent form before participating in any stage of the research process while my presence and purpose were verbally explained to secondary participants prior to observation.

Results

The Legalities-Policy Issues that Emerged During the Study

The issues that are discussed, debated, and negotiated within the local union branches are by no means the key focus of this research. The formation of role conflict that results from this process and its management by union representatives within a structural framework is the study's foundation. However, this section provides some information on any policies that were discussed at length during the interviews for the purposes of understanding and continuity.

• **TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement**

With the larger goal of overall school advancement and the milestone goals of improved student scores on standardized tests and better instruction from teachers, the TAP program is based on a widely controversial practice, that of performance-based compensation or "merit pay" for educators. "Teachers are held accountable to the *Teaching Skills, Knowledge and Responsibilities Performance Standards* and evaluated four to six times per year by certified TAP evaluators using a five-point rubric." It is the results of these evaluations as well as student performance on standardized tests over time that determine teacher compensation in the TAP system. Proponents of TAP believe that quality educators will finally be justly rewarded while its adversaries fear a compensation system that might be arbitrary or political in practice, leading to teachers having even less control over their pay scale and work environment. There are also ideological areas of contention over TAP. Such a system of compensation might undermine the collectivity of the union or place symbolic blame on teachers for

underperforming students when there are innumerable potential causes of low test scores. All of these factors enter into the narratives given by the union representatives on this issue.

- **“Right-to-Work” Legislation**

While the well-publicized political storm surrounding Right-to-Work legislation did not fully take hold until the end of this research period, the political sides taken on this issue were also well-represented in the interviews and during the observations. Early in the research there was discussion by republican members of the state legislature enumerating the benefits of implementing Right-to-Work labor policies. Such laws make it possible for workers to be employed in certain fields without being members of the affiliated union. Right-to-Work supporters advocate for the manner in which this legislation suits conservative economic policy. The policy’s adversaries invariably see Right-to-Work as a form of union-busting, with unions becoming weaker as fewer workers join but collective bargaining resources are used to benefit everyone in the employment field, including non-union members. The issue of who is for or against Right-to-Work is therefore naturally political, framing the function of the union, and forming a new work environment for union members, including teachers. The legal and political structure with the addition of the threat of Right-to-Work legislation further demonstrates that teachers union members and representatives must contend with issues beyond local grievances or negotiations between the union and the administration. Along with all of the standard issues union representatives must face, maintaining the union and its long-standing tradition of collective bargaining is another perceived challenge, potentially altering the manner in which representatives view their position.

Participant Interviews and Observations

While every participant interviewed believed him or herself to be in a slightly different position than other union representatives, a majority of participants shared a similar perspective on the position. Patterns emerged throughout their narratives, emphasizing specific priorities of the position, the ethical standards preserved by the union at both the local and national levels, the hostile environment made for the teachers union by the public school administration, etcetera. While all of the issues addressed in the asked questions are somehow interwoven, with one area always impacting another, more questions led to answers concerning conflict with union members than any other category. In this pattern, what was conveyed most prominently and most often was the belief that a lack of collectivity amongst members as the biggest threat to the survival and strength of the local union.

Conflict with Union Members

There was general agreement on the quality of the interactions that occur between representatives and school administrators (with one notable and later discussed outlier) as well as the daily work required of union representatives. However, a majority of participants answered these questions in a way that also discloses details about the relationship between the union representative and the union members. Embedded in a lengthy litany on the faults of specific actors in the school's administration as well as their antagonistic actions against the local union, a union representative with thirteen years of teaching experience in the same district, eleven years spent as a rank-and-file union member, and two years as a union representative had this to say:

“There are a lot of bad things to say about how this school’s administration has treated its teachers. Hell, the administrators gave themselves a 10% raise even after this was rated as a ‘failing’ school. But the worst of it is that they’re brainwashing new teachers to be against the union. We don’t have nearly the support we used to because the members act in the way they believe best serves their interests. Without any notion of collectivity in the membership, the union doesn’t mean anything. It’s almost impossible to work with some of the members, especially the new ones.”

On the same issue of the relationship between representative and administration, another participant broadened his response as well by remarking:

“There’s plenty to say about the administration. They’ve given themselves undeserved raises, they attack good teachers, they even put every teacher in this school on probation without just cause or any cause at all. But that’s nothing new, that’s just standard behavior for the administration towards the union that I have to deal with. What’s worse than anything else is knowing that I wouldn’t have to deal with it as much if members were unified. But I’ve tried telling them that and it hasn’t really worked yet.”

Other union representatives found the demands of the membership burdensome and difficult to manage, commenting on the impact of these interactions when asked about the daily work of the representative. An older participant with twelve years of teaching under her belt, four of those as a union representative, found the difficulties of the day to day duties of her position tied to the conflict had with members, saying:

“A large portion of my job is to disseminate information to the membership and a lot of that has to take place during the school day. For the most part, you have to keep this out of the classroom to avoid including the students in politics unless they ask directly, but during lunch and breaks, I have to make sure the members know what is going on with the union. This isn’t always easy because members will spread rumors about who is responsible for what and who isn’t acting in the group’s best interests but really, by doing this, they’re undermining the union. Confronting them is a difficult but necessary part of my job.”

Three other participants made similar complaints about the membership, including one of the two representatives from the larger local union. Three of the four participants

expressed anger or frustration at the rumoring activities of some of the members, but one was more understanding, saying:

“I know they’re doing what they think is best but I don’t think they can see how it harms the larger union goals that serve all of us. Spreading any kind of false information hurts our credibility and the way people see the union. I usually handle this with a face to face discussion, making sure all of the right policy information is given. I’ve always thought that was the best way to handle conflict.”

When asked directly about the conflict participants experience when interacting with members and how it is usually handled, an array of responses detailing ongoing struggles with the membership were delivered. Beginning with the general prompt, “Are there ever tensions between you and the members regarding union issues?” not a single participant responded that such tensions never or rarely happened (or a response analogous to these). Four of the seven participants noted the frequency of such an occurrence, saying:

“There’s always some kind of tension that comes up because we’re dealing with a diverse group of people who all have different policy priorities. When it’s your job to explain to them what is and is not feasible, you naturally run into problems.”

“All the time. Sometimes it’s intelligent dissent against union policy that I have to deal with and I don’t mind that as much. But frequently it’s a member who has wrong information about an upcoming union action and sees no other recourse but to take issue with a representative.”

“More often than not. It can be frustrating because it is not always justified. I’m not perfect and maybe I don’t always handle things well, but I do what I can. When members can’t see all the work that I put into representing them in the union or when a policy matter doesn’t go the way they wanted it to, they take it out on me.”

“You see dissent all the time, which can spark a healthy debate, but a lot of the time you get people who are angry at you because you’re working for the union, not just for them, and it shows.”

The incidence of conflict between the union representatives and the members is marked by more than just disagreements over policy. Accusations of power abuse and spreading union propaganda were reported by three of the participants, saying they were targeted by dissenting members.

“A member once sent me an email in which he called me Joseph Goebbels. I told the members to vote with their true preference on the Teacher Advancement Program [TAP] but also that the official union position is that merit pay of any type does not work, especially in an poor urban school like ours. TAP lost with a solid 47 to 24, but there were enough opposing votes for people to be upset with the outcome and a lot of members made that clear to me. One even went so far as to call me a Nazi.”

The other conflicts are less extreme and involve less incendiary language, but the participants believed themselves to be undeserving of such criticism:

“We have very little control over the outcomes of some things. Some issues are just out of the hands of a representative, and it’s usually because of the will of the members or the administration. I’ve been scapegoated for some of the local’s failures because a lot of the members really do not understand the system.”

“Yeah, I get some heat from the members sometimes. It’s difficult to explain to them how it works though and how what I do suits the position of the union. I do whatever I can for the members but sometimes it doesn’t work out or the members don’t want what will be best for everyone and for the union. That’s what happened with TAP.”

An enormous controversy in policy arose the week before most of these interviews took place. As previously described by a participant, the Teacher Advancement Program was voted down by members in a 47 to 24 vote. The teachers and union members who felt they would benefit from a form of merit pay called for a revote because they did not believe the union was acting to the members’ advantage. This perspective, according to three of the participants, was common amongst a specific subset of members.

“The teachers who work with mostly honors students are usually the ones who support merit pay. We haven’t gotten a raise in way too long and they think that merit pay is a sure-fire way to fix the problem. To them, it’s a guarantee that more money will be coming in to the teachers and that they will have more control over the evaluations process. But there are things they refuse to consider. Not all members will benefit from this and I don’t mean that to sound like we’re protecting bad teachers like the union is so often accused of. But some members teach classes with mostly underperforming students through no fault of their own. TAP would only harm them so as a policy it’s not in the group’s best interests. As a union rep I have to take that position.”

TAP emerges as theme in the interactions between union representatives and administrators as well.

General Interactions between Representatives and Members

It is very difficult in this study to separate the general interactions between union representatives and union members and the conflict that takes place between representatives and members. For the most part, when asked about the union membership, the participants focused on the areas of struggle, miscommunication, and mixed policy goals. However, there are certain areas of agreement that allow the representatives and the members to have positive interactions, but this agreement usually focuses on a common enemy. For five of the seven participants, there is a dislike for the administrations of the school districts in which they work and these feelings are observed as being common among the memberships as well. (The perspectives of the two participants who feel differently about the administration will be discussed in a later section.) When interactions between representatives and members are not framed by union conflict or the standard union business of spreading information and policy discussion, they inevitably agree on a shared dislike for the ways of the administration.

This was conveyed throughout the participants’ testimonies:

“There are a lot of arguments over how the union should best handle a specific policy, but there are still a few things we all agree on. Not a meeting goes by without making a joke about the superintendent who still can’t remember my name even though I’ve been working in her district for over a decade. We know the administration of this school is corrupt. They target some teachers for their involvement with the union, regardless of the teacher’s skill level. They are trying to fire the absolute best teacher in this building because of her leadership position in our organization. The members do frequently act in their own interests but all of them know that the administration is not here to serve them.”

As much as the representatives had to say in the interview setting, this characteristic of representative-member interaction was the single most prevalent event during observations. Throughout the several hours spent in the school setting and observing meetings of the local union branch, it quickly became clear that the previously quoted participant’s assessment of the members’ feelings toward the administration is correct. There were no fewer than seventeen remarks made that mocked the superintendent of the district, coming from both the representatives and the membership, as well as multiple comments about the administration being “corrupt”, “out to get teachers”, “stupid”, “a group of assholes”, “unable to understand how students actually learn”, “fascists”, “weak”, and “unable to take a dump without first consulting a lawyer”.

Criticizing the administration was a natural part of communication for all union members with disparaging statements constantly offered and never contested. An interaction between a young union member and a more experienced representative that took place during their lunch break began with a disagreement over the manner in which another employee’s grievance was managed but the union representative successfully ended the argument by transitioning the conversation towards the school’s administration. Both the representative and the member engaged in criticizing the administration for continuing to shorten lunch for teachers by implementing new

programs without properly allocating time during the day towards them, removing time from the teachers' lunches and preparation periods. As the conversation changed, the attitude of both changed as well, sounding more collegial and speaking with the same attitude. It should be noted, however, that mentioning this specific practice of the administration would not always yield the same result for the representative as some members were not willing to follow union policy in addressing the issue of new program implementation and opening that topic would likely lead to more conflict.

Daily Work of a Representative

Observations of the daily work of the representative, outside of the interactions and conflicts had with members, concentrated on the participant's management of union issues that appear during the day. All but one of the participants described their daily work during the interviews as including regular scrutiny of their building's safety and working conditions, consultation with administration about policy issues to better understand the policy before later taking the formal position of the union, and taking note of contractual issues that would need to be discussed at the next union meeting.

"You're always a union voice within the school walls. I always try to make sure I'm prepared to answer questions, regardless of where they come from, and it is important to remember that union issues never stop happening. From the relatively small problems like whether or not teachers can wear jeans in the classroom to the large problems like the restructuring of the school day without the administration consulting the teachers, I am consistently taking note of things that violate union standards and are collective bargaining issues. My job in the union is to make everyone's job in the school as professional as possible."

But it is not just the standard procedures officially required of the position for which the union representative is responsible.

“The work doesn’t actually end. It’s not the daily work I mind because it can be very rewarding when a member asks me to address a problem and it comes to a proper resolution. But as much goes into union business during the workday, I find myself spending my nights on lengthy union issues and grievances that do not always work out. Between teaching, making time for my family, and being busy with the union even during the summer, the real work can be a burden. But I stay with it because it’s part of a cause.”

The stress of the position was felt by some participants more than others, with four reporting notable amounts of pressure in their position. These four tended to be more experienced with the position than the other three, commenting on the change in the union and its impact on their duties.

“It’s to the point where I wouldn’t tell students to become teachers. To be a teacher in this political environment is stress enough because of how the state government is trying to privatize public education. But the daily impact of these issues on the union frequently feels impossible to manage. I believe in the union but I need more people to believe in strong unions as well. Fewer than 10% of union members are willing to speak out about something they believe in. I feel responsible for fixing the policies that attack teachers but I need more than what I’m getting. Times have changed, it used to be easier.”

“I’ve been doing this awhile but this past year has been so stressful just in the day to day grind that I was recently diagnosed with stress-related heart problems. The constant problems with member support, the hostility of the administration, and the feeling that the daily work will not make a difference because of the way the union is viewed.”

There was one participant that felt differently from the rest regarding his regular duties, admitting that his experience and history with the union had been vastly different from most individuals in his position. As the president of the larger local union, he depicts his duties in a manner that varies entirely from the others. Where the other president has been teaching in the same school district for over twenty years and was a building representative before being elected into the position of president, this participant went from law school to work at the national union and was put in the position of president. The duties of the president of the smaller local matched the observed and

described duties of the other representatives and he regularly dealt with the same problems. Because the president of the larger local is removed from the school environment, his position and daily work does not match that of a building representative, and he does not report the same problems as the other participants. When asked about his daily duties, they were entirely managerial.

“My job is to look at the larger scope and direction of the efforts of the local union. The nuts and bolts of grievances are managed within the school buildings but I maintain the official union position. I still make regular building visits to check in with my representatives but I grant them the autonomy to handle most issues on their own. [...] My stress level has increased recently because the world is not being nice to unions but I’ve never questioned that this is what I love to do.”

The president of the smaller local commented:

“The school building is my home base for union issues. I work with the building representatives to work through the everyday decisions made by the administration as well as any grievances filed by members. It can be onerous to deal with but I feel like I can be the voice of the members because I work with them and they are able to come straight to me.

As evidenced by the difference between these two backgrounds and the resulting perspectives, the duties and conflicts of a representative are unique to anyone filling that role. They are not necessarily just a result of working with the union in a tumultuous political environment.

Interactions between Union Representatives and Administrators

As noted by the representatives interviewed, interactions between representatives and administrators are almost always negative and framed by larger political issues outside of the classroom. The participants acknowledged that their position and allegiance to the union gave them unique exposure to the administrators, although not all of them believe that their attitude towards the administration is more negative than rank-

and-file members who consistently support the union's position. Identification with union principles, in some but not all cases, is seen as a more pertinent characteristic in defining one's relationship to the union than the position in the union itself.

"Some of the older union members who have been with us a while are generally more willing to fight with the administration than we are when it comes to union issues. Everyone has to remain professional, of course, because the increasing ability for the administration to undermine us puts us in a vulnerable position. I can't say this for all members, but there are a few members who will speak out at school board meetings and take very stubborn stands. I'm always in support of the union but I also have to represent the union and recognize when we're fighting a losing battle. Sometimes I don't get to fight with the administration as much as I would like to."

"In terms of the actual school day, every one of my interactions with the administration has to be respectful and professional. I don't agree with a lot of what they do but for the most part we work in the same building and around a lot of impressionable students and that's more important. When it's strictly union business, I firmly stand by my convictions, those convictions being that the administration consists of union-busting power-hungry idiots. I don't think I'm alone in that sentiment, the entire union seems to feel the same way."

There was also the perspective, however, that the direct negotiation of union issues had a greater impact on the quality of the representatives' attitudes towards and interactions with the administration. Union issues during the time of research, such as the TAP vote and the imminent Right-to-Work legislation, and the manner in which they were negotiated were prominent in the participants' testimonies regarding their interactions with the local public school administration.

"It's natural that the administration and the union have different priorities. I can't blame them for disagreeing with us on some things. But this school system's administration too often caters to the state government and acts against the best interests of educators and students. They aren't on anyone's side but their own and when it comes to the negotiating table, I have to tell them so. After TAP was voted down, the administration demanded a revote, which was held in the principal's office so there was no anonymity. As a union we decided to protest the legitimacy of the revote by abstaining. They counted all of those abstentions as being for TAP. Even in the school, the administration subjugates teachers."

“The way TAP is designed, administrators are given even more power in deciding who gets paid what or in designing the rubric that makes that assessment. Before TAP, they’ve been targeting the heavy-hitters in the union and trying to fire them, I hate to think what would happen with TAP in place. On top of all of this, there’s union-busting legislation in the state house. As a teacher and a union rep, I feel weakened with every action of the powers that be. Needless to say, positive interactions with the administration have been few and far between. I try to avoid actually talking with them as much as necessary.”

What was increasingly prominent in the participants’ testimonies over the research period was the linking together of the state government with the local administration. While this relationship always existed as the government dictates some of the terms under which public schools are funded, it is frequently in the administration’s best interest to act in the accordance with the state’s wishes. However, the participants found the administration to be acting in its own financial and power interests and undermining those who work and learn in the school. The representatives began to speak much more combatively towards and about both the state and the administration, not separating one entity from the other.

“The union and teachers in general are being attacked from all sides. They’re working together because it’s trendy to blame teachers for the failure of public schools instead of fixing the schools themselves. State officials can be reelected on the platform that they’re improving education by getting rid of bad teachers and administrators feel secure in their job when they publicize how they’re going after teachers too. Really they’re just hurting schools and getting away with it. I’ll keep standing my ground as a representative and hope that union member really wake up to this reality.”

“As a representative, my worst nightmare is looming. I’ve been dealing with the crimes of the local administration for a while but now that they’re being legally supported by the state government with union busting [Right-to-Work] legislation I don’t really know how to keep us strong. If this passes, it will effectively harm collective bargaining in this state forever. If it doesn’t, the mindset of the state and administration won’t change and I’m worried it will spread. My job will still be incredibly difficult.”

There is one anomaly in the participants’ discussion of the relationship between the representatives and the public school administration. The participant I interviewed

who is the president of the local union that is much larger than its nearby counterpart from which five of the other participants hail has a widely different explanation of his interaction with the administration. His attitude toward the administration seems to remain similar to that of the other participants but his interactions with it were quite different.

“Some members of the administration are fascists and there’s no getting around it. The state government is even worse in terms of intentions and politics. I have to negotiate with the administration and lobby the state, but I’m good at separating that from my personal interactions with them. The governor has been a good friend of mine for a while and I’m close with a lot of the administrators. We disagree over things but I don’t really have bad feelings towards them and I enjoy the friendly, if not professional, time I spend with them.”

Because this president was interviewed in order to validate by comparison the perspective of the president from whom the snowball sample was built, this point of view was not expected to be replicated by any of the other participant. However, the building representative interviewed from the same local union shed some light on the president’s perspective, explaining the function of his local union as it relates to others.

“Our president likes to claim that the administration will work against the union from time to time but generally they’re willing to work with us. That hasn’t really been my experience and our president has been accused of being in bed with the administration and state officials by the membership more than once. I don’t know that I can really blame him, he’s a little removed from what happens directly in the school. But I know the attitude of the administration toward the union is much more predatory than he claims. I can’t help but feel negatively towards most administrators.”

While an adversarial relationship between the representatives and the administration is not surprising to any of the participants due to ideological differences, an increase in those negative attitudes due to new union policy issues and the combination in the participants’ minds of the state government and the local school officials assist in defining the modern relationship between institutions.

Discussion

Based mostly on the in-depth interview process as well as observations of the representatives, it is apparent that role conflict for the union representative results from pressures from union members to manage diverse interests, requirements from the national union to adhere to the ideology of the union, and the stress placed on the union by the administration. The position of the union representative is unique in the larger public school and union structures as it sits at the intersection of both and needs to mitigate and manage the demands of each.

The struggles of union representatives can be seen in every facet of their work environment. However, it is the duty to the membership and the frequently incongruent response of the members to the representatives' actions that potentially impose the greatest amount of role conflict. The participants provided lengthy descriptions of the union members' transgressions against the actions and goals of the union with several of them concluding that the members lack collectivity. While deciding that the members act toward their own individual advantages, which differ slightly from educator to educator, the representatives also assume the responsibility of representing the members as a unified group. The participants seem to experience the most frustration and conflict when members have interests that contrast from the needs of the majority of members. Observations revealed an interaction between a tenured teacher who felt she would benefit from the implementation of TAP policy and a representative who was left to support the opinion of the majority after the vote. Calling for a revote and supporting the administration in its efforts to do so, the teacher demanded that the representative "do his job" by "working for the teachers, not just for the union."

What becomes evident throughout the in-depth interviews and the observations is the striking difference between the union and what it means to be a member of the union, with members having a naturally more limited view on what policies and actions will prove beneficial. However, a key issue that needs to be considered here is in whose interest should the representative be working when member demands conflict with union mandate? While the two are technically never supposed to be mutually exclusive, there are cases, such as the one described above, where some members do not feel properly represented by the union during negotiations. This struggle of purposes falls heavily on the shoulders of the union representative, as he or she is meant to both “handle grievances” (AFT) of the members and make sure the local union is “compatible with the goals and expectations of the parent union.” (AFT) The parent union requires that the representative work for the teachers in the manner in which the union mandates but the representative has the daily pressure of working alongside teachers who may not always agree with union policy but see the representative as being on their side regardless. As the representatives stated, they need more collectivity in the membership to be successful and to fulfill the ideology of the union but regaining that collectivity could mean shifting the stance of the union on some issues. The role conflict felt by the representatives in this system of contrasting goals manifests as frustration with the members, especially those who act outside of the goals the union expects them to have.

With the frustration as the main mechanism used by representatives to deal with the role conflict that happens when there is dissent in the membership, the position of the representative seems to have stronger ties to the union than to the membership. Not that the representatives do not care about the quality of every member’s experience on the

job, but the participants were particularly sensitive when the administration would target a teacher because of his or her strong union affiliation and less concerned with the few teachers who feel victimized by the union because merit pay was not instituted. It is union policy to protect any members who are in any way mistreated by the administration. However, all five of the representatives who worked with the teacher who was being targeted by the administration remarked that it was unjust because it was happening as a result of her union standing. Those who were in favor of merit pay were, in fact, deemed “selfish”. Whether or not the dissenting members actually are being selfish in their demands by not supporting the union or the entire membership on a specific union issue, the representatives are more willing to attribute blame for the trouble they experience in their position to dissenting members than they are the parent union.

While this pattern can be readily identified in the data, its causes are more difficult to discern. The ongoing strength of the union is in its ideology, even when it is being pressured by outside forces like public school administrations or the state government. It preserves the concepts of unity and collective bargaining, frequently establishing a better work environment and increased job security for its members. This decades-long tradition has created a political constituency around teachers unions, fully backed by its pro-teacher ideology. It can be hypothesized from the data that the participants find stability in the goals of the union and rely on the potential success of collectivity, their allegiance making it difficult to place any blame on the demands of the union for their role conflict. From the participants’ perspective, the value judgment can be made that the teachers who act against the union violate an important principle and therefore the frustration expressed towards these teachers is rightfully directed.

However, the parent union, in its official description of the union, do not have any mechanisms that safeguard against this role conflict for the representatives, assuming that the union always represents the collective interests of the teachers. Throughout the interviews and observations, not a single negative word was said about the work of the union by any of the representatives, even though the union could conceivably take action to ease the role conflict felt by the representatives. If a devout commitment to the principles of the teachers union is behind the lack of frustration and negativity the participants' express towards the union, it remains to be seen in future research if that is a result of an inherent quality had by individuals who become very involved in the union or if it is an inescapable result of the representative position itself. There is also the possibility that it could be both. Because the present research includes interviews with two local union presidents, one who was a union representative and still holds the duties of a representative and the other who has never held any position in a local union other than president, and they have drastically different attitudes towards the school administration, the state government, and the union membership, the pattern demonstrates that there is likely something unique about the representative position itself.

While it was originally hypothesized that the current pressure from the school administration and the state government on the teachers union would be a great source of role conflict for the participants, the interviews, observations, and general political circumstances suggest that the opposite may be true. Because the strength of the union is in its ideology, as found in past research, a strong challenge to such ideology may cause dissenting members to be more supportive of the union. The union representatives, who ask for unity and collectivity from the membership above all else, would likely

experience less dissent from the membership and a common focus on the larger goals and principles of the union, thereby decreasing a source of role conflict. The research found that the participants began to identify the state government and the public school administration as one in the same, thinking of them more as colluding enemies of the union than separate institutions with interests that diverge from those of the union. Should the membership adopt the same understanding, the collectivity of the membership could increase, potentially satisfying some of the representative's demands. It should be noted that this study identifies this as a possible outcome of policy action made by the state government and the politically ideological response of the union membership. It is impossible to do more than hypothesize on this pattern, however, as the Right-to-Work policy did not emerge in the statehouse until one month after the time period of this research the response of union members could not be formally assessed. However, this exploratory research identifies a possibly significant phenomenon in the structure of the teachers union and more research is needed that takes a broader approach to studying the impact of union-busting legislation on the membership and indirectly on the role conflict felt by the union representative.

Conclusion

Using in-depth interviews and observation of seven union officials who were gathered using a snowball sample and six of whom are union representatives, this exploratory study identifies potential sources of role conflict for representatives. Because very little research had been done on this before and the important middle position of the union had been undefined by the previous literature, it was hypothesized that the major actors in the union structure, the membership, the parent union, and the conflict with the

school administration could all be sources of role conflict. It was discovered that the central frustration of representatives comes from dissent and lack of unity among the members, a condition that conflicts with the representatives' duties to act towards union goals while representing the members in negotiations. The pressure of the school administration and the new policy put forth by the state government that threatens the function, utility, and strength of unions did not seem to add to role conflict for the union representative but instead offered a potential mechanism for decreasing such conflict.

Admittedly, the conclusions found in this research are not conclusions at all. They are a foundation for new research into the role of the union representative, asking different questions than past research, which focused almost all of its energy on the ideology of collective bargaining and the impact of the evolving power structure within the union. Those studies laid the groundwork for this research and together they provide a substantial body of knowledge on a changing system. Future studies should be performed on teachers union representatives, concentrating on any changes felt by the union representative during times of union collectivity and times of union dissent. The power of an evolving political environment on that relationship should be examined to a further extent as well and over a longer period of time for a greater understanding of the teachers union representative to be found.

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